

Five reasons the senior crowd is the it crowd

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One significant difference between Eastern and Western perspectives is how we treat the elderly. Although modern society is eroding some of our Chinese traditional values, in general, there is still more respect and honor for the elderly than our Western counterparts. Western society is highly youth-centric: valuing industriousness, productivity, and vitality, marginalizing the aging population who easily sense themselves fading into irrelevance. I hope this is an instance where the global church in the North can allow other cultures to speak prophetically into its faith community, because without a doubt, older people are anything but irrelevant.

Here are five reasons we need seniors in our churches:

1. Irreverence is the new reverent

We love Betty White, or the Countess Violet from *Downton Abbey*, not because of their gentle manner, but because of their snark: the privilege to say really offensive things and get away with it. As I've written elsewhere, [irreverence says it like it is](#). Like children, we often get unfiltered truths tumbling out of older people's mouths. Suppressing truth beneath a reverent surface breeds avoidance of real problems. We delight in the uncouth ramblings of the elderly because *somebody's gotta say it*.

2. They have lived a lifetime of hard

Not to be Negative Nelly, but the honest truth is that life is hard. Nobody lives through decades of life and without having weathered some severe storms. The wisdom to be gained from experiencing and surviving pain is invaluable. It would benefit us all to listen and learn.

3. Perspective

When I was embroiled in the drama of my teen years, be it zits or boys or college applications, my mother was always able to assuage my fears by telling me it's all going to work out and everything will be OK. She was right, of course, having

survived her own teen drama years; she knew growing up a few years was going to smooth out the wrinkles of adolescence. The gift of perspective can do wonders for those of us trapped in the confinement of our anxieties. This is what our older brothers and sisters can offer us. They who have survived the years of life we have yet to live can give us a reprieve from our finite experiences. They who know the healing of time can offer us some rescue balm for our present battles. They can lend us their perspective to aid us in sorting out our priorities and what really matters in the long run.

4. Slowing Down

In my current season of life, between jobs and young children, my time often runs out before all the errands are done. My typical day consists of dashing from the doctor appointment to the grocery store back to pick up the dry cleaning. I don't realize I have worked myself up into a frenzy until I get stuck behind an older person in a wheelchair, proceeding in her slow pace while my own frustrations mount. However, waiting the extra three to five minutes to accommodate her needs did not bring the world to an end. The dry cleaning was still there. Our pace of life, aided by the insane speed of technology, has disturbed our souls into believing faster must be better. Those whose physical bodies have suffered blows or have simply become weary from years of activity, they require us to slow down, and in exchange we gain a healthier balance in life. And of course, our faith is one with rich traditions of contemplation and prayer, neither of which can happen without an intentional slowing down of our rhythm.

5. Vocation of Suffering and Death

Our modern, industrial society has removed us from death. We pick up our meat from refrigerators in grocery stores, sanitized from the realities of farming and butchering. Professional funeral services take care of the logistical details after death of our family members. We have essentially outsourced death which deprives us of the opportunity to normalize the natural life cycle and a chance to reflect on how better to live in light of our inevitable death.

Richard Mouw, in his reflections on "[Retirement Home Christianity](#)," references Peter Berger, who observes in *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies*,

it is certainly appropriate to show concern for the vocation of Christians in industrial society, as long as we are aware of the fact that there are some Christians whose one vocation remains to suffer and to face death in faith.

When we honor those among us who are suffering from pains of old age and approaching the end of life, we gain a glimpse into the core of biblical teachings on faithfulness in suffering and death. Let's not elevate the vocation of industriousness over and above the vocation of suffering and death, because the latter seems to be a more central concern of our Scripture.

I'm not a big fan of segregating church services by age. I don't want to miss out on rubbing shoulders with those who have traveled further down the road of life. I want to witness how they are faithful in their walk so that I might follow as my own years grow.

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